



State of California

LITTLE HOOVER COMMISSION

August 26, 1999

The Honorable Gray Davis
Governor of California

The Honorable John Burton
President Pro Tempore of the Senate
and members of the Senate

The Honorable Ross Johnson
Senate Minority Leader

The Honorable Antonio Villaraigosa
Speaker of the Assembly
and members of the Assembly

The Honorable Scott Baugh
Assembly Minority Leader

Dear Governor and Members of the Legislature:

More than 100,000 California children wake up every morning in a bed other than their own. They are children who have been so abused, so neglected that the government has taken them from their parents. But their fate, now in our hands, is still uncertain.

These children represent a public trust of the highest order. Yet in many instances we fail to provide for their safety and well-being.

Even more injured children – no one knows how many – are still with their parents. The abuse is hidden or the neglect is not yet severe enough for the drastic step of protective custody. As public leaders, as community members and as adults we share a responsibility to help these children, as well.

The problems of these families are complex. The number of victims is growing. The programs charged with protecting and caring for abused children are overwhelmed. In most communities, there are never enough foster homes. In trying to meet the basic needs of all maltreated children, the specific needs of individual children often go unmet. Inevitably some boys and girls who should be rescued are not. Some boys and girls end up in foster homes that are as dangerous as their own. Contrary to the goal of keeping foster care short-term, for many children foster care becomes an endless nightmare.

Numerous reforms have been made to the State's child welfare programs – a sign of collective concern and growing frustration. Bill after bill has been drafted to mend the latest hole in the overloaded safety net. But still more children end up in foster care, for longer periods, denied the simple comforts of childhood.

Foster care should be – and can be – a healing place and more can be done to make it a nurturing refuge. But foster care is not the cure. Protecting children from abuse and neglect requires a broad spectrum of responses – from preventing abuse and strengthening troubled families, to helping reunited families and adoptive families make this life-altering adjustment.

Prevention and early intervention programs – whether intended to head off initial abuse or recurring abuse – reduce the trauma to children and the demand for foster care. These programs exist, but they are underdeveloped, as most of the funds are reserved for children after they have been taken from their parents.

This is the third time in a dozen years that the Little Hoover Commission has reviewed programs serving abused and neglected children. The Commission appreciates and admires the work of many Californians dedicated to helping maltreated children, from policy-makers who have worked tirelessly to foster parents who have loved generously. But sporadic leadership, ineffective management and a lack of accountability compromise the effectiveness of their labor.

Dozens of federal, state, county and community organizations have some responsibility for abused children. Yet no one person or agency is responsible for ensuring that efforts are coordinated. Children receive the help that programs offer, not what they need. Performance data is muddled or missing. Most of the funding is tied to rescuing children from abuse, rather than protecting children from abuse. And much of the resources are tied to specific services, discouraging agencies from thinking about the multiple needs of individual children.

The benefit of the numerous reforms and pilot projects is that lessons have been learned. The most productive reforms have tried to integrate the efforts of single-task government agencies. But most of these reforms are not statewide or system-wide.

To clarify the importance of this public mission, the Commission urges policy-makers to establish clear goals and direct the involved agencies to vigorously pursue them.

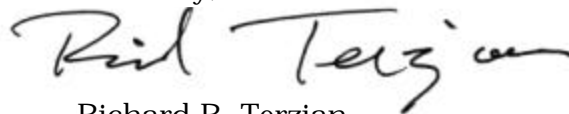
To solve the management issues, the Commission recommends that an Undersecretary of the Health and Human Services Agency be charged with responsibility for these children and the authority to focus programs on their needs.

To infuse accountability, the Commission recommends specific steps that should be taken to measure performance and allow for program managers and policy-makers to expand the best available reforms statewide.

Some of the tasks that the Commission would assign to the new undersecretary could be assigned to the existing management structure. But given its fragmented nature, to do so would hamper the possibility of success. Among the assignments is to forge a better partnership between state and county agencies, which can best be accomplished by an official capable of resolving problems at the state level that are limiting success at the county level.

The Little Hoover Commission stands ready to assist you in these efforts.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Richard R. Terzian". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Richard" and last name "Terzian" clearly legible.

Richard R. Terzian
Chairman

Now In Our Hands:
*Caring For California's
Abused & Neglected Children*

August 1999

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